

VZCZCXRO5805  
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHDM #0431/01 1731311  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 221311Z JUN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6504  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5802  
RUEHTR/AMEMBASSY ATHENS PRIORITY 0364  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0172  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0606  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0303  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 0807  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0575  
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE PRIORITY 0094  
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0932  
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0086  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0654

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000431

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/I  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT  
PARIS FOR WALLER  
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/21/2029

TAGS: [PREL](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG CAUTIOUSLY SUPPORTS AHMEDINEJAD VICTORY IN  
IRANIAN ELECTIONS

REF: DAMASCUS 364

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (S/NF) The Syrian government (SARG) appeared pleased by the initial tally of Iranian votes overwhelmingly in favor of incumbent President Ahmedinejad. President Asad sent a letter of congratulations to his Iranian counterpart and the official Syrian press lauded the high voter turnout as a win for Iranian democracy and Syrian-Iranian relations. After the beginning of almost a week of large-scale Iranian protests, however, Syrian officials and press refrained from public comment through President Asad's June 17-18 trip to Armenia. Embassy sources suggested Syrian officials were viewing unrest in Iran in the context of Israeli PM Netanyahu's June 12 speech. Privately, SARG advisors were also criticizing Western interference in Iran, a theme which has become more prominent in the Syrian press since Asad's return to Damascus. Most of our sources doubted whether electing Mousavi or Ahmedinejad would make a difference in reforming the policies of the Iranian regime, but some suggested the ongoing power struggle might transform into a popular movement against the Ayatollah. A Sunni business contact suggested that the protests, taken together with Hizballah's electoral disappointment in Lebanon, had momentarily undercut Shia influence in Syria and the region more broadly. End Summary.

-----  
Initial Reactions Positive  
-----

¶2. (S/NF) Syrian officials and press reacted positively to reports that Iranian President Ahmedinejad had garnered 65 percent of some 40 million votes during the June 12 Iranian Presidential elections. President Asad reportedly sent Ahmedinejad a June 13 note of congratulations, and

government-owned dailies al-Tishreen, al-Baath, and al-Thawra hailed the Iranian results as an affirmation of Iranian democracy and a guarantee that Iran would continue to support Arab resistance against Israeli occupation of Arab lands.

-----  
Followed by Suspicion of Western Motives  
-----

¶3. (S/NF) As widespread claims of fraud by Iranian opposition candidates led by Mir Hussein Mousavi coincided with week-long public protests in Tehran, Syrian officials and press remained quiet. SARG advisors and officials, however, privately expressed deep concern and frustration over the coverage by Western media (CNN and BBC, in particular) which they believed to be fomenting unrest and acting as an instrument of Western interference in Iran's internal affairs. American scholar Joshua Landis (strictly protect), an expert on Syria in country for a short stay with his Syrian (Alawite) wife's family, told us June 21 that Presidential Media and Political Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban (also an Alawite) had complained to him that day about "overt Western interference in Iran's internal affairs." An agitated Shaaban parroted Khamenei's June 19 sermon to the Iranian people by arguing it would have been impossible to forge 11 million Iranian votes. Shaaban questioned what might have happened had similar demonstrations by the opposition occurred in Lebanon after the June 7 Parliamentary elections there. "We would have been denounced for

DAMASCUS 00000431 002 OF 003

interfering," Shaaban reportedly claimed to Landis.

¶4. (S/NF) Landis assessed that regime officials shared similar views and that most of the Alawite community stood solidly behind Ahmedinejad. (Note: The Iranian religious authorities years ago granted the Alawites status as a sect of Shia Islam. End Note.) "Nothing is more important for the Syrian regime than stability, and this (the week's events in Iran) has threatened stability," Landis said. According to regime figures with whom he had spoken over the last week, Landis said there were deep suspicions that Western countries were actively "fanning the flames" inside Iran in order to undercut the Iranian regime and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Syrian government strongly supported Khamenei's use of force to re-establish control. One unidentified Syrian military contact, Landis relayed, reportedly said that Syrian officials "would not have hesitated to rig the elections" or "to put down" an opposition-led popular uprising.

-----  
Potential Syrian Interests At Stake in Iran  
-----

¶5. (S/NF) Al-Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi (strictly protect) also emphasized the SARG's deep mistrust of Western motives in criticizing Khamenei's handling of the disputed election results. Hamidi, who traveled June 17-18 with President Asad to Armenia, reported that events in Iran "were on everyone's mind." Several Syrian MFA officials with whom Ibrahim spoke confided that Mousavi's open challenge to the Iranian regime could distract Tehran at a time when Israel was openly "thumbing its nose" at the Arab world, he said. Though the focus of the trip had little to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict, Hamidi commented, "most of the Syrian focus was on how (Israeli PM) Netanyahu's (June 14) speech had left little hope for real peace negotiations and how events in Iran might weaken Syria's position."

¶6. (S/NF) Hamidi added that Syrian officials remained unworried about U.S.-Iranian relations, but they had expressed concerns that continued unrest would "distract" the Iranian regime just as Israel had adopted a more confrontational posture. Syrian officials were agitated by

BBC and CNN coverage giving undue air-time to the Iranian opposition and putting pressure on Western leaders to criticize Iran. Hamidi suggested that Syrian officials were "not upset" by the U.S. Administration's public reactions, though Congressional resolutions and "comments by neo-cons" raised doubts about whether the White House was effectively managing its message.

-----  
Syrian Sunnis Rooting For Mousavi?  
-----

¶7. (S/NF) Not all Syrians were upset with the images of unrest in Tehran, argued Ihsan Sanker (strictly protect), a former Syrian MP and a prominent Sunni businessman. Sunni elites in Syria had been very pleased to see Turkish President Abdullah Gul's successful May 16-18 visit to Syria, which followed on a "very weak and hasty" May 6 visit to Damascus by Iranian President Ahmedinejad (reftel.) Sanker reported he had heard complaints from a wide range of Sunni friends and contacts that the SARG had become "too close to Iran," and the Gul visit had helped to establish a

DAMASCUS 00000431 003 OF 003

counterweight to Tehran's influence. Sanker said many Syrians were "ecstatic" over March 14's victory in Lebanon's June 7 elections, primarily because "it put Hizballah back in its box." Sanker suggested that even top Syrian officials would have been "uncomfortable" with a strong March 8 showing because it would have diminished Syria's influence in its relations with Hizballah and Iran.

¶8. (S/NF) The large protests in Iran against flawed elections, Sanker continued, had the potential to transform into a popular movement against the Ayatollah. "Many Syrian Sunnis see a reduction of Iran's influence in Syria and the region as a positive," he argued, "because Iran doesn't want Syria to pursue peace with Israel." From a business vantage, Sanker surmised, "the most positive thing Bashar could do to help the economy would be to sign a peace deal with Israel." The Israeli Government, he added, "was stupid" for not recognizing the opportunity to engage Syria at a time when Iran was torn by internal divisions. "All Arab governments are now in a defensive posture after Bibi's (June 14) speech," he insisted. Sanker warned that Israeli's posture could help Khamenei "turn the tables" by isolating Mousavi and other opposition figures and by portraying them as villains disloyal to the Iranian revolution.

-----  
Syria Media Breaks Silence  
-----

¶9. (S/NF) After a week of virtual public silence, Syria's government-owned press has begun to decry foreign interference in Iran and to question the motives of Western countries criticizing the Iranian regime. "Al-Thawra" ran a June 21 op-ed decrying Western interference in Iranian affairs and pointed to (along the same lines as Bouthaina Shaaban did with Josh Landis) the lack of any apparent Western concerns about vote buying in Lebanon. In a rare Syria media event, privately owned TV station al-Dunya interviewed Sayyid Mojtaba al-Hosseini (identified as "Khamenei's representative to Syria") on June 20. Hosseini decried the role of Western media and officials who were exerting pressure on Iran "behind the scenes."

¶10. (S/NF) Comment: While it is difficult to tell with confidence how President Asad and his close circle of advisors are viewing events in Tehran, we judge their main priority will be to ensure continued Iranian military support of Syria and Hizballah. Lacking any near-term indicators the

Israelis will be ready to resume peace talks on acceptable terms (i.e., an Israeli commitment to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 borders and return the Golan), the SARG will almost certainly seek to protect its strategic life line to Tehran by publicly defending Iran's elections and the government's efforts to restore order and by denouncing Western criticism of the Iranian regime. We also expect Syria to leverage its improved relations with Saudi Arabia and Lebanon to push a defiant Arab response to Netanyahu's June 14 speech.

CONNELLY